

## TRENDS IN THE SUPPLY AND DISTRIBUTION OF OBSTETRIC CARE IN NORTH CAROLINA, 1998

### Overview

This fact sheet examines the supply and distribution of health care professionals who provided obstetric care<sup>1</sup> in North Carolina in 1998. The demographic and practice characteristics of active physicians and non-physician practitioners who delivered obstetric care in that year are described using data from the North Carolina Board of Medical Examiners, the North Carolina Board of Nursing, the North Carolina Midwifery Joint Committee, and the North Carolina Center for Nursing.

### Background

Research has associated a lack of adequate obstetric care with increased infant mortality, low birth weight and poor maternal and child health outcomes (Nesbitt, 1997, HRSA, 1992). Despite this awareness, persistent inequalities in the availability of obstetric care exist across the nation (Lishner et al., 1999). Various factors affect the availability of obstetric care, particularly in rural areas; these include hospital closures, health professional shortages, prohibitive obstetric malpractice insurance rates, liability concerns and the discontinuation of obstetric services by individual professionals (HRSA, 1992). In response to these pressures, marketplace trends, and state regulatory activity, the face of obstetric care is changing.

While physicians continue to provide the majority of obstetric care in the United States, the number of other health care professionals [certified nurse-midwives (CNMs), nurse-practitioners (NPs) and physician assistants (PAs)], providing obstetric care has increased steadily during the last decade. In 1989, physicians attended 96% of all births nationally; by 1997, this percentage had decreased to 92% of births. During the same period, the percentage of births attended by midwives<sup>2</sup> increased from 3.7% in 1989 to 7%<sup>3</sup> in 1997 (NCHS, 1999, Curtin, 1999). A similar change has occurred in North Carolina. In 1989, 98% of live births were attended by a physician in a hospital setting, and 1.6% were attended by a certified nurse midwife (SCHS, 1989). By 1998, 92% of live births were attended by a physician, and 7.5% were attended by a certified nurse midwife (SCHS, 1998).

### Physicians Providing Obstetric Care in North Carolina

In 1998, there were 15,135 licensed physicians actively practicing in North Carolina. Approximately 75% (11,133) of these physicians responded to questions on the North Carolina Medical Board's licensure form about the provision of obstetric services.<sup>4</sup> Among those who responded, 1,004 (9%) physicians reported that they provided obstetric services (i.e., deliveries and/or prenatal care) in North Carolina, or 1.0 physicians per 10,000 women between 15 and 44 years of age. Of the 1,000 obstetrically active physicians, 78% (783) provided prenatal care and attended births, 16.4% (165) provide prenatal care only, and 5.6% (56) only attended births (**Figure 1**). ▶

**Figure 1.**  
**Physicians Providing Obstetric Care in North Carolina,**  
**1994 and 1998**

	1994*	1998
Attending Births	896	839
Providing Prenatal Care		948
Providing Prenatal Care and Attending Births		783
Attending Births Only		56
Providing Prenatal Care Only		165
<b>Total Obstetrically Active Physicians</b> (attending births and/or providing prenatal care)		1,004

Source: North Carolina Health Professions Data System, 1998

\*Note: No question about the provision of prenatal care appeared on the 1994 physician licensure renewal form.

<sup>1</sup>Throughout this fact sheet, the term obstetric care is used to include care given during a woman's pregnancy (i.e. prenatal care) and during the birth of her child (i.e. delivery).

<sup>2</sup>While this percentage includes certified nurse midwives as well as other midwives, all of the growth in midwife-attended births has been for certified nurse midwives. The number of births attended by other midwives actually decreased over the same period.

<sup>3</sup>There is some evidence that the actual number of births attended by CNMs is higher than the figures reported on birth certificates (Curtin, 1999). This may be partly due to confusion about which practitioner to enter on the birth certificate when more than one is supervising the birth.

<sup>4</sup>Response rates for the data presented in this fact sheet vary from 72-100%. Percentage calculations are based on the number of providers who responded to questions about the provision of obstetric care services.